DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 137 783 CS 203 274

AUTHOR Perence, Mary Lou
TITLE Poetry and Pragmatism: An English Major Internship.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (66th, Chicago, November 25-27, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Majors; *English Departments; *English Instruction; Field Experience Programs; Higher Education; *Internship Programs; *Liberal Arts Majors

ABSTRACT

An internship program developed in the English department at the University of Maryland provides English majors with the opportunity to sharpen their abilities and to gain preprofessional experience, while employers gain the chance to discover the talents and skills of English majors. Students in the program earn four credits for the semester course--three for the work experience and one for an evaluation paper at the end of the semester--and work approximately eight hours a week, usually without pay from the employer. Students have been trained in bibliography and publications at the Library of Congress; advertising, layout, and design for organizational publications departments; article writing for conservation newsletters and journals; newspaper editing, feature writing, and reporting; and legal research and writing for a legal aid bureau. (JM)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

D15
Ference

POETRY AND PRAGMATISM: AN ENGLISH MAJOR INTERNSHIP

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Mary Lou Ference

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER.

Mary Lou Ference
Instructor of English
University of Maryland, College Park

ED137783

I often wonder how English majors react to the lines in Frost's "Two Tramps in Mud Time" where he asserts so hopefully "My object in living is to unite/My avocation with my vocation." Students planning to teach literature can adopt this philosophy most readily. But what about other students who enjoy the study of language and literature, but who are not interested in education as a career? Are these students, committed to aesthetic and humanistic values doomed, like Chaucer's scholar, to have "but little gold in cofre" because they lack specific training toward career goals?

As an advisor in the English Department at the University of Maryland, I kept these thoughts in mind as students asked for career counseling. First of all, I tried to help them define their career possibilities. I worked with the Career Development Office on campus to explore the job market for English majors, consulting surveys which demonstrated the fields in which English graduates usually qualified. Writing to a wide range of employers, I questioned them about the types of positions for which they would hire an English major graduate.

I showed students how to write resumes, how to prepare for an interview. Former English majors, representing various professions, were invited to speak to our students about their own career backgrounds, responsibilities, and opportunities. Our English department initiated a faculty recommendation file for English majors that would assure them of a credentials file for their resumes.

But the students lacked the essential on-the-job experience, and were unable to perceive their own marketable skills. We can all say with some certainty, that unless an English major teaches after graduation, he will not be able to apply the subject matter of his English courses to a job. He won't discuss Hamlet with an

CS 203 774

IBM employer or write Joycean press releases. But he certainly will be able to draw on related skills fostered by his literature courses--clear and logical writing, the rational analysis of ideas, and basic research methods. Our students, who had not recognized the many skills inherent in their major discipline, faced the job market with a limited view of their abilities.

For future employment, the students needed some meaningful work experience which would sharpen their abilities, and give them valuable pre-professional training. A departmental internship program, we thought, could offer work experience for academic credit, while improving the career possibilities of our majors.

What we saw as a viable solution to career-related problems for our majors--this internship program--posed many questions in terms of philosophy and procedure. What kinds of employers would welcome and train an English major intern? What kinds of jobs and responsibilities would English majors prefer? What skills and attitudes in such a program would make it academically valid? How can we evaluate this work experience in terms of a grade?

Our first problem was the lack of models for such an idea. Our canvas to English departments at several eastern state universities brought only negative replies. While more pragmatically oriented departments, such as journalism and education, consistently offered field experience, most humanities departments, while uniformly interested in such a program, had never initiated one themselves. Swarthmore College, I found, offered an "extern" program during a mini-term in January during which students from all departments interned in various positions with alumnae. While our needs and goals were not the same as theirs, I received much valuable information from their Career Advising Office regarding the implementation and evaluation of a field experience course.

We then had to seek out competent and relevant employers, question our majors about their commitment to such a program, and petition the department's curriculum

committee to approve a course of this type. The last task, as you can well imagine, proved the most difficult, in terms of their accepting a creative work experience course in a traditionally conservative department.

After working a few months with these three groups, we worked out the policies for an internship program in the department that was accepted by all parties involved.

The application process begins at the Advisors' Office. The students fill out an application form which requests, among other information, previous work experience, career goals, and faculty recommendations. He then has an interview with the advisors who, if they find him qualified, send him to three employers who match his interests and abilities. Most students who apply, we found, have a very high cumulative and major average, are highly motivated and committed to a work experience program. The employer will then select the person whom he feels meets his demands, and he has the final word on the choice of student.

In our present program, the students earn four credits for the course, three for the work experience itself, and one for an evaluation paper required at the end of the semester. This paper is based on a list of questions we provide which assesses both the skills and experience gained, and relate their major curriculum to their work experience. The four credits for the course are ungraded Pass-Fail units which do not count toward the required credit hours for the major, but can be applied to university elective requirements.

The interns work approximately eight hours a week, usually one full day without pay from the employer. The interns meet together as a group twice during the semester--first, after the initial three weeks of the program and again at the end of the term. These meetings help us determine the commitment of both the student and the employer as each intern shares his experiences and responses with the advisors and each other.

The employers, too, are involved in the evaluation process through a form which we have devised which concerns skills, attitudes, and general progress of the intern. They also can evaluate the program in terms of their expectations from the intern and from our office.

The employers who participate in the program are diverse and demand different types of skills and interests: The Library of Congress, Division of Blind and Handicapped, for example, trains students in bibliography and publications; the public relations departments of several nearby social service organizations offer students experience in advertising, layout, and design. The National Wildlife Federation and Audubon Naturalist Society assign interns to write articles for the conservation newsletter and journals, and a number of local newspapers train interns in editing, feature writing, and reporting. Many English majors who are pre-law students appreciate the opportunity to become involved in the sort of legal research and writing required at the County Legal Aid Bureau.

Several positions demand a literary background. Students who are not education minors have spent their internship semester teaching writing and literature in private high schools, often reconsidering teaching as a possible profession. Some interns are involved in script evaluation for the New Playwrights Theatre in Washington, while others exercise their creative faculties working for Black Box Poetry, an organization which reviews and tapes contemporary poets.

What do we see as the results of such a program after two years of operation? Has it fulfilled its goals? We noted several factors which we thought contributed to the success of our program: First of all, limiting the number of interns involved allowed us to work closely with students and employers and to facilitate the evaluation process. We were highly selective with the interns and employers, choosing those who were highly motivated and committed to the program. Second, the geographic location of the University of Maryland between Baltimore and Washington offered us a wide range of employers in writing and research fields from which to choose, including many government agencies. And finally, our university has a field experience course number which may be adapted by any department who wishes to institute an internship program. Therefore we have a relatively easy time with registrations and credit procedures. These are factors which may pose a problem initially to departments.

What about problems encountered? The difficulties we experienced were rather mundane and often reflected a student's naivete about working off-campus. One rather staid employer complained that he had the distinct impression that his intern was not wearing a bra to work, a practice which he thought violated the insurance company's dress code. There were, of course, complaints on the other side. One attractive woman intern found it difficult coping with the flirtatious gestures of her supervisor. Our suggestion to be judiciously assertive seemed to suffice for the semester, but we solved the problem with this otherwise excellent supervisor by sending him male interns in the future. In general, our office refrained from interfering with the intern-employer relationship, so that the internship would duplicate, as much as possible, an actual work situation for the student.

Let me speak about the effects of the program in terms of the three groups involved--students, employers and department faculty.

Most students were surprised to find that their academic skills were valuable in the job market. One intern who worked as a press aide to a Senator commented on the relationship of his major to his work responsibilities:

> I found the knowledge of rhetoric (of if you will "(term paper language") that one gains in four years as an English major to be the primary skill needed. A flexible writing style is also necessary...to write for widely differing audiences.

An intern working for the public relations department of the Red Cross evaluated the benefits of her major as general preparation for a career. She wrote:

> An English major prepares one well for any work in which one deals with people, ideas, and communication. And what job does not deal with all these? English literature, my major, affords insight into the universal, yet somehow unique, behavior, emotions, and aspirations of all human beings. One learns to analyze ideas and to write coherently. Social and political history is inescapable in the study of English literature from Beowulf to current American and British works. One learns from the past to deal with the present.

Many students found the experience helpful in other ways: they are forced

to evaluate their abilities and priorities in terms of a career decision. One student who wrote for an employee relations magazine confessed to her limitations:

> This experience has made me wary of going into this field of writing....Public relations writing required such modification--almost a self-negated style....I could "prostitute" my talents to earn a good salary as a public relations writer. But I seriously think I could not do it: I am too proud and hot-headed and obstinate right now to work under such conditions. I do appreciate having participated in the internship program, however, simply for the opportunity to make this decision.

To many interns, too, the internship program was an initiation into the working world, into a rhythm which was quite a contrast to the pace of college life. One intern lamented what she called "company mentality."

> Compared with a campus atmosphere, office mood is often dull, petty and behind the times....I would come in contact with approximately five people every day. Compared with the vast number of people that one reacts with in a typical college day, this was quite a let-down.

As career preparation for English majors, the program has been quite successful. Last spring, four interns were offered permanent positions as a direct result of their affiliation with the program--in areas of public relations, hospital communications, library publication and teaching.

Employers also have reacted positively to this experience. One employer commented on the advantage of the liberal arts orientation of the interns.

> The internship gives the students the experience they need in learning some specific job, but we prefer them to come in with a broad background, being knowledgeable in several areas, so they know what's going on in the world.

The employers obviously benefit from the services offered by the intern and learn the worth of an English major as a prospective employee. In providing a service to the educational community, he enjoys his contacts with the university world.

The most difficult area of evaluation is that regarding faculty response. Many are sympathetic to offering pre-professional training for majors. One professor views it as a significant transitional step between academic life and career responsibilities:

> I personally know several students who have felt the internship helped bridge the gap between their work in English and the work-a-day world into which they graduate.

I would say however that most attitudes reflect a disinterestedness, and perhaps understandably so. Many faculty are not interested in a program such as this, because it concerns career options which are often alien to their own goals and interests. A lot of negative responses come from those who feel that an intern program does not demonstrate sufficient academic credibility in a humanities curriculum. But rather than seeing such a program serving purposes antithetical to the humanistic tradition, cannot we see it rather as fulfilling a humanistic purpose? We offer students guidance when they apply to graduate schools or for teaching, because we, as English faculty, feel competent in these areas. Shall we offer aid only to those who follow in our footsteps?

We foster the values of humanism and aesthetics in students, but by ignoring the necessary realities of career preparation, withhold from the means by which they can enjoy these values. An English department need not be an employment agency, nor advocate technical education, but where is the humanism we propose to teach if we avoid the apparent need of our students who are asking for guidance?

There is much that is valuable in the humanism of Newman's Idea of a University or Huxley's concept of a Liberal Education; but perhaps we need to go back a century earlier and temper these theories with Benjamin Franklin's faith in pragmatism, versatility and experience as a hallmark of a truly learned person. Or let's consider another eighteenth-century figure, quoted by one of our interns as she concluded her evaluation of the program. The Earl of Chesterfield offered prudent advice in a letter to his son: "Knowledge may give weight, but accomplishments give lustre, and many more people see than weigh."

An English department surely benefits from a service such as an internship program that may brighten the vocational prospects of its majors. Our majors

will remain committed students of literature when job possibilities related to their skills are demonstrated. George Santayana has said that the "function of literature is to turn events into ideas." Perhaps we can say that a function of the teaching of literature can be to turn ideas into events."

I believe a program like an internship in a department can help us confront the job situation of our majors without being despondent, without feeling that aesthetics and imagination must be sacrificed to pragmatism. Such a progam is actually a public relations tool for the abilities of the English major, talents that have been too long ignored by both the academic and business community. In terms of recognizing the career potential of our students, we can very well adopt the philoooohy of Thoreau as he explains his Walden experience: "I do not propose to write an ode to dejection; but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up."